Only half divine

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Only half divine

by BumblebeesAndDandelions

Summary

A Psyche and Eros retelling.

A monster lived on the mountain. The monster was old, they said, and when it grew hungry enough, it would creep down the mountain in search of mortal men to consume. It tore those poor souls apart, twisting them into horrors, even in death depriving them of their humanity.

There was a young man in one of those villages, more beautiful than any before him. They called him their own lovely Helen, a godling made mortal

Notes

June 15 - | Blindfold |

I am guessing with the chapter count. I have the second chapter nearly complete, and I think I can wrap it up in one or two more after that.

Chapter 1

A monster lived on the mountain. Not in a cave, or crouching atop some pile of bones or gold, but in a manor. No one knew about the manor, of course, they just knew about the monster. A well kept home wouldn't have fit into their grisly stories anyway, told in hushed whispers around fires, scaring children back to their beds and creating ghosts to haunt each other on the long winter nights.

The monster was old, they said, and when it grew hungry enough, it would creep down the mountain in search of mortal men to consume. It tore those poor souls apart, twisting them into horrors, even in death depriving them of their humanity.

There was a young man in one of those villages, more beautiful than any before him. They called him their own lovely Helen, a godling made mortal. They found themselves, when confronted with the sight of him, reaching for stories of power and beauty, memories of art and song, in their attempts to describe him.

He was a thing that made men covet, especially as he grew, though he spurned any advances. He was a thing that made those less than him near violent in their jealousy.

They would burn down the world for a chance to claim his hand, and had traveled from far away lands to try to win him as their own.

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"Run away with me." Beverly offered.

They were sitting in the old oak tree that grew beside the river, twisting and knotted. Will's wedding was in two weeks, although the one he was marrying was yet to be chosen. His father had decided that his hand would be won by gold, largely to avoid the bloodshed that threatened if the many vying for his son's hand were allowed to duel for it.

Will laughed at her offer, throwing a leaf torn off the oak at her and watching it catch in the winds, spiraling lazily to the bank of the river, just out of reach of the water.

"Where would we go that we would not be found? What city could we travel to that is not already the home of one of my suitors?"

Beverly rolled her eyes at the statements, huffing. They were true, and the reasons her offer was not made in any seriousness. The suitors had traveled from near and far to see him, to claim him. Alana had offered another option, marrying her before any of the suitors could lay claim, but they both knew that a marriage between two poor villagers from a town no one could name would not stop any suitor determined enough to make the journey there in the first place.

No, if he tried to run, or duck their advances, one or more would simply take him by force, avoiding the messy troubles of courtship and marriage and dowries. Not to mention the thing

that made his mother leave, his father so desperate to find someone for Will to marry that he could bear to give his only son to.

His mother had been cursed. She was a wanderer, had been before she met his father, and, if she was still alive today, likely still was. She'd met something, a god maybe, or maybe just something old, with power. It didn't matter, really, in the end. What did matter is that she'd done something to offend it, in some way, and it had cursed her. Or, as Will privately thought, maybe it had just been a prophecy, something that would have happened no matter what his mother did or said to any being on her travels. The curse, or prophecy, and weren't those the same, really, once spoken out loud? Said that she would have only one child in her entire life. It said that that child would be one that, in another life, could have been a hero, blessed by the gods and beloved by all. Instead, this child would marry the most hideous of monsters, and live with them forevermore.

She'd stayed barely a year after Will was born before leaving. Will didn't blame her, although he knew his father did. Being left in a remote village with a cursed child, one destined to be taken by a monster, was hardly a fate worth envying. But he'd kept Will, raised him and loved him, even as Will grew and envious eyes started turning towards him.

Finding a spouse for Will among the nobility was not only an attempt to keep war from breaking out. It was also an attempt to thwart his son's curse. After all, was the man who hoarded his riches while his people starved not a monster? What did the thousands killed by a single man's blade see in their final moments if not a monster bringing them their doom? Every man seeking Will's hand was a monster in their own way, but they were still human, and that was enough to soothe his father. The monstrousness of man was something he could understand, and even if he hated it, it was something he could sentence his son to.

So Will would stay, and walk down the aisle when he was told to. After that, he'd decided, the time until the end of his life was malleable. If his husband was truly a monster, and the world was better off with him dead, Will would be willing to ensure that, even at the cost of his own life.

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It was overcast, the morning of his wedding.

It was outdoors, a large archway made of woven sticks and flowers framing the man he was to marry, with rows of seating stretching back to form a pathway for him to walk. The entire village had turned out, along with many from the neighboring villages and at least a dozen of the suitors that had failed to win his hand.

All of them stared as he walked down the aisle. He wore white, clutching a bouquet of white flowers that had been handed to him by a mournful Alana. They both knew the reputation of the man he was going to marry, named Mason Verger. He was said to be cruel, to enjoy the pain and suffering of others. He'd been married twice before, and both brides had disappeared within a year. But he was rich enough and vicious enough to secure his place at the end of the aisle, so he was who Will would marry.

The walk felt endless, each step weighed down as if he were carrying a mountain on his back. Paled, weak consolations, murmured to him by friends, by his father, looped in his head. At least he was handsome, if one liked that sort of thing. At least he would provide for Will, for a time. At least he was human. He was said to enjoy killing the weak and breaking the powerful. Will wondered how long he could tread the fine line between those, how long he could bend himself into something that had the hope of remaining safe.

Then he was under the arch, facing his future husband. Mason Verger reached out to clasp clammy, rough hands around his own, holding him in place. They were cruel hands, made to hurt. The open glee on the man's face only deepened Will's dread about their wedding night. If the rumors were true, he would be lucky to survive the night at all, let alone unharmed.

The priest was talking, asking Mason to repeat after him, but the wind had picked up, the gentle breeze turning harsh. It whipped through the thin summer fabric of Will's outfit, tearing flowers from the arch as the sky darkened.

The priest stuttered, eyes wide on the dark clouds roiling above their heads. It could have been a summer storm, they came on quickly and with a vengeance, but it felt somehow unlikely.

Will tore his eyes from the sky when he felt his hands being released, and found Mason Verger stumbling back from him, sputtering. The priest appeared rooted to the spot, eyes fixed on something behind Will. Suddenly feeling very much like a rabbit about to feel the cinching pain of a trap close around it, Will turned to face the thing behind him.

His first thought, half hysterical, was that his father would be so disappointed. Because the thing that had joined him under the archway was a monster unlike any Will had heard of before. It was tall, with twisting antlers reaching past the top of the arch. Its long face resembles that of a dog, lips twisted into a growl around large, pointed fangs. Its body was a massive mass of fur and feathers, ending in clawed, inhuman feet. The long hands reaching to clasp Wills own were tipped with inky black claws that felt cold against his skin. It was horrifying, and the details of the thing kept changing, shifting. The dog head was now a bear, or a deer, or a distorted, melting human face.

The thing glanced at the priest, and the shaking man began talking again, restarting the vows. His legs shook, and he kept making little jerking motions, like he was trying to move but couldn't. Like he was being trapped in place by the monster he was marrying to Will. Will wished he could say he was also trapped in place, as the priest and likely many of the remaining guests were, but he wasn't. He could run, if he truly wanted to. It would mean ripping his hands away from the monster and turning his back to the thing, though. And, a voice inside of him pointed out, if he rejected this monster, what would the next one be? Or the next? Would his curse somehow see his escape as a challenge, and send him worse, more horrifying monsters? Another part of him, small and vicious, was just profoundly grateful that the thing had allowed him to see what fear looked like on Mason Verger's face, and had saved him from marrying him.

So he stayed at that altar, the wind still buffeting them, and when the priest asked Will to repeat after him, he did, numb. His father was crying in his chair, jerking in the same way the priest was, unable to move. There was no kiss, just a hoarse, "you're now married," and then

the wind picked up again. The monstrous thing moved forward, pulling Will into its arms, and then they were moving, heading straight up the mountain. Will flinched when the thing moved towards him, and, held against the things chest, was so tense that he nearly shook. He was going to die, and he should have run, and- the monster glanced down at him with a dozen different eyes, and then he was drifting, the world darkening as he fell unconscious.

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He awoke in a bed. It was covered in soft silk sheets, and he could feel sunlight streaming warm across his body. The comfort of it was enough to delay the return of his memories for a moment, allowing him a spare second of peace before it all returned to him.

The wedding, the monster.

There was cloth on his face, a knot digging into the back of his head. He reached up to tear the fabric from his eyes, freezing at the sound of a gentle cluck of a tongue coming from somewhere terrifyingly close to him.

“I’d highly recommend you leave that on, my dear Will.” The voice was accented, deep. Slurred slightly, as though spoken through teeth not meant for human speech. Will's eyes darted blindly beneath the blindfold, but it was too thick to see more than a slight change in light.

Carefully, Will felt the edges of the blindfold. It was cotton, soft against his skin, and tied tight enough that it would not slip off.

Remembering the shifting form of the monster, he was almost glad for the blindfold. Was that its intention, to shield his eyes and mind from the terrible form of his husband? Or had this monster heard the tales of his mind, shadowed as they were by tales of his beauty, that said he could see the very souls of men? It wasn’t true, at least to that extent. Will was good at seeing people, good at knowing them. He could not fault his husband, monstrous as he was, for fearing that, although he’d much rather have his sight, even if it forced him to confront exactly what he had bound himself to. His fingers slipped away from the cloth, falling back to the silken sheets. Regardless of the reason for the blindfold, starting a fight would be a poor move when he didn’t know what he would fight, or how it fought at all.

Apparently satisfied that Will would not remove it, the monster hummed, a low, throaty sound.

“Are you hungry? I have prepared breakfast.”

Will nodded, realizing for the first time that he was starving. Claws closed around his wrist, and he was led to another room and seated at a table. The floors felt like polished stone under his bare feet, and he wished he could see where he was. His hand was guided to a fork, and they began to eat.

It felt surreal, and Will’s determination to act as if it was normal, fine, quickly faltered and broke. He would not be some toy to be played with and then discarded, and right now, he felt

an awful lot like a toy, posed at a table for a monster's amusement. He dropped his fork, and it clattered to the table, causing the soft sounds of the thing eating across from him to pause.

Politeness, beaten in since childhood, warred with his obstinate nature. It won, barely, although what actually came out could barely be called that. It wasn't an open declaration of hostility, at least.

"You're my husband, and I don't even know your name. Do you have one?"

"I have a name. Most things have names, should one care to ask and learn the language they speak. I am Hannibal Lecter. I'm afraid our ceremony was rather rushed, but I promise you, my dear Will, I intend for us to know each other."

It wasn't a threat, but a promise. At least it implied Will would be allowed to live, however pale that comfort was.

He stared blindly down at his plate, still not touching his fork. He still felt as if a sword was hanging over his head, ready to swing down with one false step. He'd rather throw himself on the blade than tiptoe blindly, hoping to avoid it.

"What if I don't find you that interesting?" He asked, steel lacing his voice.

"You will," Hannibal replied. Promised. There was power in those words, a force and a conviction. They ate the rest of the meal in silence.

Hannibal took their plates, and disappeared with a promise that Will could, once alone, remove his blindfold and wander the house freely.

After a long moment, listening for any sound or hint that Hannibal could be nearby still, Will removed the blind fold, blinking in the bright sunlight.

Slowly, and half convinced he'd be stopped and punished, Will explored his new home. He was right about the floor, it looked like marble, black and veined through with white. It was large, with at least three stories, all dark and rich furnishings and large, bright windows. Empty room after empty room, each spotless.

There was a library, packed with shelves. Will wandered among them, finger tracing along the spines. His initial fear had dissipated, replaced with curiosity. This didn't seem the home of a monster, unless that shifting horror spent hours reading and decorating and cleaning every day. And cooking delicious meals. He pulled out a title on insect species, settling in a large, padded chair to read it.

He'd nearly finished the book when the blindfold materialized atop the pages he'd been reading. He stared at it for a moment, uncomprehending, before it clicked, and he tied it around his eyes. He wondered briefly, as he was knotting the fabric, if Hannibal would have avoided him if he'd chosen to not put the blindfold on, or if he'd simply have walked in anyway.

Hannibal greeted him, announcing that dinner was ready if Will would join him in the dining room. It was a slightly easier journey this time, now that Will had spent hours exploring the halls, but he still had to rely on Hannibal to find the dining room.

Their dinner was delicious, a finely cut meat and more sides than he really knew what to do with. He suspected, based off of the house, that the meal was likely arranged neatly on his plate, despite the fact that he was unable to appreciate the design, blinded as he was.

The only light filtering through his blindfold was the faint flicker of candles, the sun having set entirely now. His breathing shallowed slightly, thoughts of the night ahead pervading his mind. There had only been one bedroom prepared for sleep that he had found in his exploring, and it was clearly the one he'd spent the night in. For all of his civility, Hannibal was still a monster, and despite his long absence today, he was still Will's husband. There were things expected of Will, things he'd thought he'd prepared himself for, mentally. But all of those thoughts had been about a human husband, surrounded by subjects and servants that would be there to temper the man, however slightly. Now, he was alone, with a thing that, if the stories were to be believed, twisted others into shapes as easily as he twisted himself, leaving corpses across the countryside. The monster that lived atop the mountain. That he would be sharing a bed with.

"Will? Are you alright?" Hannibal asked, smooth and civil as ever. Concerned. Will flinched slightly at the question, and cursed himself for it.

"I-," the words, the questions, wouldn't come out. They stuck in his rapidly drying throat, dread lodging them in place.

"You- tonight?" He finished weakly. Images of Hannibal at the wedding, towering over him, flashed through his mind. The sheer size of him out in the open has been intimidating, but in a bedroom? He'd been told by the old wives of the village, as they wove flowers into his hair for the ceremony, that the first time would be the most painful, and then he'd adjust. He couldn't imagine surviving anything that Hannibal would offer, much less adjusting to it. Ghosts of the imagined, anticipated pain brushed over his skin, causing him to tense further in his chair.

Hannibal sighed, and there was a small clink as he set down his fork as well.

"Will, I am afraid I have allowed for a miscommunication, and for that I apologize. You are safe here. Safe from any danger, and safe from any harm, including that which might come from me. I will not force you, in our bedroom or out of it."

It felt surreal. It felt like a horrible joke, and at any moment, the blindfold would be torn off, and he'd find himself surrounded by suitors jeering at him. Surely no husband of his could be kind? Surely the monster he was destined to marry would be as horrible within as he was without? His heart was racing, beating in his chest so fast and loud he was sure Hannibal could hear it, and he slumped slightly in his chair.

Safety was never a concept he had allowed himself to conceive of in relation to a marriage. Marriage had always been a word for future pain, a trial he was destined to be forced into,

with no guarantee that he would come out alive. Safety, then, felt foreign. It was supposed to be a thing left behind in childhood, not promised to him by his husband.

Hannibal changed the subject lightly, asking Will about the book of insects he had been reading. Will answered absently, slowly being drawn into the conversation that continued over a small dessert of sugared fruits. He was comfortable with insects, fascinated with them, and talking about them was a welcome respite.

He only remembered his fears when they were in the bedroom again. He was blind with the cloth covering his eyes, and he felt the way to the bed slowly. It had been made, and he sat gingerly on top of the covers, still half convinced Hannibal would appear and throw him onto the bed to ravish him. Instead, he heard the soft, even footsteps of his husband approach, and then there were fingers, human fingers, brushing against his face and removing the blindfold.

He froze at the touch, not daring to move. Even without the blindfold, it was far too dark to see anything. Hannibal, still touching his face with the barest tips of his fingers, wasn't even an outline in the dark. The hand left his face, tugging him gently into the bed. He slipped beneath the covers, entirely distracted by the sensation of the hand on his wrist.

Was this one of Hannibal's forms? How much of him was human? If his previous transformations were any indicator, then he rarely transformed more than a single part of himself into any one creature. The human hand, smooth and warm, could be connected to any shape, any unimaginable horror. It could be one of a dozen arms, each of a different creature, or- no. If seeing his husband would drive him mad, so too would imagining blindly the forms he was taking.

The hand had released his wrist, leaving him marooned in the expanse of silk and pillows. He felt the bed shift slightly as Hannibal moved beneath the covers himself. He was far enough away that they didn't touch, but Will could feel the slight tension in the blankets where they pulled against Hannibal. There was a warmth by his hand, still outstretched, and he brushed his fingers out, feeling the back of Hannibal's hand. He pulled back out of surprise, and then, with an unexpected daring, reached out again until the tips of their fingers brushed.

Hannibal remained still, so Will left his hand there, feeling the soft skin against his fingertips. Staring out into the dark, he tried to make out any shape of his husband next to him in bed, but couldn't. The darkness was too encompassing. It didn't matter, really, what his husband looked like. His form was a changing one, ever shifting, and anyway, if the most monstrous part of him that Will had to contend with was his appearance, then he was lucky. He was godsblessed.

He fell asleep surprisingly quickly, drifting off in the sea of silk, anchored by the light touch of fingertips against his.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> I'm still technically on track as far as chapter count. 3 is partially written, and will likely be posted in a couple days.

They fell into a routine after that. Will would wake alone, and once he blindfolded himself, Hannibal would appear to lead him to breakfast. Then he would disappear until dinner, leaving Will to wander the house, and afterwards, they would retire to bed, apart except for brushing hands.

The house had a large garden, with winding paths and flowering plants, that Will explored at length. It was peaceful, and felt enough like the home he had left that it brought him some comfort. He would bring books from the library to read on one of the benches darting the garden, spending hours out there.

It was serene, and calming, and, once the fear and frantic reassessing of his situation had passed, boring. He had been there a month, and done nothing but read and walk and talk with Hannibal. He didn't ask where he went during the day, was almost afraid of the answer. He knew the stories told about what the monster atop the hill did, but they were supposed to be rare, with years in between. He didn't know what else Hannibal would do. He knew he adored art from their conversations, and music. Maybe he bound himself in some small, easily overlooked form and went to the cities to indulge his interests. Maybe he simply followed Will around, always staying just out of sight, but that seemed out of character for him. Maybe he was in one of the few locked rooms in the house, the only places Will had not yet explored. He'd asked about them, and simply been told to not go looking.

Still, the boredom grew. It was an odd feeling, to be bored with a place that he had felt such terror in. He tried to ignore it, but it chafed. It dragged him from books and sent him wandering the house aimlessly, made him shorter with Hannibal during their conversations until finally, Hannibal's patience grew thin.

"You have been acting off for days, my darling. What is troubling you?" He asked. They had nearly finished breakfast, or should be nearly finished, but Will was pushing his food around more than eating it, and he knew his plate was still mostly full. He couldn't see it, but he'd been getting better at moving through their world sightless.

Will chewed his cheek, trying to find a way around the question. Hannibal was a better husband than he could have hoped for, and absent and kind was far better than the ever constant cruelty he'd been expecting from Verger. Admitting his boredom felt like critiquing Hannibal, a rudeness he wanted to avoid.

“Your house has only so many rooms to explore,” he offered, cheeks reddening slightly beneath the blindfold.

“You’re bored.”

“I- maybe?” Will ducked his head, an old habit formed to avoid eye contact that was useless with the blindfold. No need to avoid seeing too much when you couldn’t see at all.

“Your mind is far more valuable to me than your beauty, Will. It would be a travesty to see it wilt, neglected, in my home. Tell me what I can do to alleviate your boredom?”

Will was slightly taken aback by Hannibal’s seriousness. The tone and conviction with which he said those words made it sound as if he would move mountains to bring Will some comfort. As if he would do anything, so long as Will was happy.

“I guess… I used to take care of the huntings dogs? There were four of them, and one had a litter of three, and I would feed and train them for the hunters in our village. It was nice, being able to take care of something.”

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully, clearing their plates. He disappeared as usual for the rest of the day, and made no mention of the conversation at dinner, instead talking at length about an artist he enjoyed and their particular style with sculpture.

The next morning, after breakfast, Hannibal remained. Will waited, confused, for Hannibal to leave like normal, but instead, he asked if Will would like to walk with him around the garden. They walked down the hall, familiar enough now that Will needed no help, although their shoulders brushed anyway, a constant, gentle closeness. In the garden, Hannibal led them down the twisting paths, taking enough turns that, if Will hadn’t spent most of the past month exploring this garden, he would have become quite lost.

Finally, he stopped at what Will knew was a small sitting area, a circular area tiled with bricks and lined with three benches. He enjoyed reading there, in the shade cast by the large trees. He waited, hesitatingly expectant for whatever Hannibal would do.

Hannibal moved away, his warmth disappearing from Will’s side. After a moment, Will heard a small snuffling sound, and then a scrabbling of nails brick. Will froze, unbelieving, until he was startled by the force of a small body throwing itself against his legs.

Laughing, Will knelt, petting the dog that was circling him in open excitement. It lunged forward, licking his face and causing him to sputter and fall backwards, laughing again. Hannibal had gotten him a dog. He buried his fingers in its hair, allowing it to lick his arms and neck.

After a moment, he remembered himself, and glanced in the general direction he thought Hannibal was in, face still soft and open with joy.

“Thank you, Hannibal.”

Hannibal hummed, a content sound. He moved closer, kneeling beside Will and the dog, who largely ignored him, and pressed a soft kiss to his temple, moving away before Will could think to react. Will stilled, staring sightlessly in Hannibal's direction, lips twitching around the vaguest idea of words. Humming again, Hannibal walked away, footsteps soft against the old brick.

As soon as the footsteps faded from his hearing, Will tore the blindfold off. He watched after Hannibal for a few seconds, staring at the empty pathway. His monster would be gone until morning.

The movements of the dog tore him away, and he watched it race around the garden. It was a puppy, less than a year old, and a golden tan color. He decided to name it Winston, after the knight from the last book he had read.

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In addition to Winston, Hannibal took to spending more time with him. At least once a week or so, but often more, Hannibal would remain in the house after breakfast, and they would wander.

Unrestricted by mealtimes, their conversations flourished, although the topics remained largely the same. Neither of them brought up any subject that might be volatile. There was no mention of the kiss, or Will's village, or their wedding, or where Hannibal went when not with Will. A tenuous peace, and one that could not last forever, but they enjoyed it nevertheless.

Winston was easy to train, and he adored Will. He would follow him through the house, pressed against his side, and would curl around his feet whenever Will decided to sit with a book. He was an easy comfort. The training and caring for Winston was more than enough to occupy Will, and he enjoyed the chance to use Hannibal's kitchen to make his steady supply of dog food. It was spotless every morning, regardless of how messy he had left it the previous day, and Will amused himself with the thought of Hannibal scurrying around the kitchen, exasperated with whatever mess Will had left, but never enough to bring it up. He envied Hannibal's patience.

It had been nearing the end of summer when they married, and now fall was fast turning into an early winter.

Hannibal, even with his morning visits, disliked being in the sunlight. When he stayed, they would keep to the darker rooms of the house, curtains drawn and doors closed. He seemed to hesitate at allowing Will a glimpse of even his shadow as it fell across his face. As the days shortened, Hannibal allowed himself to spend more time at the house. They began eating dinner slightly earlier, and spending the time after together as well.

They were in the library, Will lounging on the chaise while Hannibal read aloud, his eyes able to pierce the dark they were in far better than any human.

It was a book of fairytales, and Will listened to Hannibal's smooth, accented voice describe great dragons and brave knights, ancient battles fought over forgotten kingdoms, sacrifices

made to save a people. Will wondered, half focused on Hannibal, what sort of story they would make, if told by another. Would anyone be able to twist enough to see it the same way Will did, with Hannibal the imposing hero, sweeping him away from a monster who surely would have broken him? Or would they just see Will, at the altar with a man, only to be kidnapped by a monster too hideous to look upon? Or perhaps he'd already been forgotten, the slighted suitors returning to their homelands and finding others to marry, his village settling, relieved to no longer be the home of one cursed by the gods.

It felt like a dream, this home. He'd nearly forgotten, or allowed himself to forget, the faces of Hannibal he'd seen. He was safe, and cared for, with all he could want. It was not the life he'd been prepared to have.

Hannibal paused in his reading, tapping a finger lightly against the spine to catch Will's attention. He turned his face in the direction of Hannibal, eyes squinting open uselessly under the blindfold. It felt late, and the languid relaxation Will felt was steadily melting into tiredness.

At the slight touch on his shoulder, Will stood, swaying slightly as the blood rushed to his head after so long on the couch, listening to Hannibal read.

He leant against Hannibal as they walked towards the bedroom, craving his warmth. He was nodding off slightly as they walked, suddenly exhausted. The chill of winter air had crept through the house, slipping past tightly shut windows. It brushed against his limbs, leaving goosebumps, and he pressed closer to Hannibal.

In bed, Hannibal moved away, as he always did, allowing space between them, and the chill of the air was filling the space. The despair Will felt at the cold was irrational. He had spent whole winters curled on a tiny cot, clutching a single blanket in the futile hope it would block out some of the biting cold, he could handle the slight chill that crept beneath silken sheets. He didn't have to, though, and that was the sticking point in his exhausted mind. There was warmth right there, and he couldn't remember a single reason not to have that warmth. Will, far too tired at that point for rational thought, much less legible speech, whined in frustration at the cold, grabbing at Hannibal's hand. Hannibal allowed himself to be moved, and then Will was clinging to him, their limbs tangled together. Warm, Will sighed once into Hannibal's chest, and then fell asleep.

Hannibal remained awake through the night, watching Will in adoring fascination. He preserved the moment, creating an entire room in his memory palace to hold the feeling and sight of Will curled against and around him. There were already entire wings of his palace dedicated to him, each laugh and smile recorded and saved within him.

His gentle, beautiful, brilliant husband.

His Will.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> The first bit of this was supposed to be in the second chapter, but I couldn't get it to work in time. I'm 95% confident the next chapter will be the last. Also- if I forgot to tag something, please let me know! I haven't really been double checking

Two weeks had passed. They'd spent every night curled together, and Hannibal seemed so delighted at the change that Will could barely bring himself to feel embarrassed for being the one to instigate it.

As if the cuddling had opened a door, Hannibal became much more tactile. Less during the day, but as soon as the sun set, he would be there, brushing against Will or combing fingers through his hair. He would take Will's hand when they walked, thumb making small circles against his skin.

Will became accustomed to it far quicker than he'd expected. He hadn't had much physical contact before, even back in the village. He wasn't allowed to rough house with the other boys, because his father feared him getting too close to any of them. It had been a justified fear, admittedly. One of the boys, Matthew, had taken an interest in Will, and thought I'd he could prove himself in some way, Will would like him back. Will still had the scar, faded now, on his shoulder, from Matthew. He hadn't been a monster though, just a boy desperate for connection and looking in the wrong place. There was another boy, from their neighboring village, who sought connection too, and told Will all about mushrooms and how they could understand each other like Will could understand people. They both wanted things from Will, like all the suitors that came later had. Now, both boys had the connection they wanted, the connection Eldon had dreamed of, and Will was here. Hannibal didn't want like that, or he didn't make it known.

Beverly touched, all rough tackles and joking shoves. She treated Will like a sibling, not like some tragic figure that should be mourned even before he was taken. Alana watched more than she touched, standing at the edges when he and Bev roughhoused, trotting behind during races. Will had asked her once, when they were both children, why she always seemed so scared of herself, and she'd cried and refused to see him for a week. Years later, he would understand that she was protective, and had very little way of enforcing that protectiveness, and that made her scared. She wouldn't be able to protect Will from his future husband, or from his own mind and beauty, and her powerlessness caused her fear.

His father hadn't touched, not more than a pat on the back or a ruffle of his curls. The older wives of the village had touched him on his wedding day, scrubbing his skin raw and tugging at his hair to weave flowers in, but that didn't really count. It had been obligation, not trust or affection. Every person he allowed touch from could be counted on one hand, and had been

in that circle of trust for most of his life. Hannibal was, as in all things, new. A deviation from expectation.

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There was less variation in stories than people thought. All of them, broken down far enough, were the same story, or at least versions of the same story. A hero, a villain, a monster, a lover. There was a killer, who could be any of them, or none of them. There is death in every story, even if the author omits it, shying from the thing that will be their own end. There is pain in every story, and doubt. What would be the point of telling the story if Orpheus never looked back? What would be the point of bravery if there was no fear?

Will often found himself viewing the world through a lens. The lens shifted, malleable, to whatever clung most tightly his mind. Fishing, he'd learned, was a useful tool for clearing away the cobwebs left by others, a way to sink into that water and emerge as something wholly himself. Surrounded by stories bound in aging paper, he reached for them, crafted metaphors from them. Heroes and villains, dragons and knights. Simple, unchanging.

Stories didn't sink into him like people did, just clung to his skin like spiderwebs. Hannibal didn't sink into him like most people, although he wasn't sure if it was the blindfold keeping them so separate, or Hannibal's inhumanness.

Not that they were separate. There wasn't Will's empathy to link them, his endless seeing and sinking. They were certainly more physical now, but that felt like a product of their connection instead of a connection in and of itself. He'd never had the chance to connect with some emotionally without his empathy carving a path to their desires and fears. He didn't need to strengthen his walls around Hannibal, because blind, there was nothing attempting to tear through them. He had grown accustomed to the sort of violence that was required to remain whole, to rip out foreign feelings, fears, memories.

Hannibal wasn't a soft place to rest. He was no sanctuary, and Will knew that. His husband had a darkness he only knew the vaguest edges of, but it was enough that he'd never questioned the blindfold, never asked for knowledge he wasn't sure he wanted. But he was a smooth, cool place, and Will was so used to spears and thorns and flames. He wasn't the knight in the story, or the dragon.

Will wasn't much of a damsel anyway, regardless of the stories. He'd heard them, had them told to him by Beverly as she laughed, or by suitors, eager and earnest or leering and expectant. He knew even Hannibal believed them, at least in part, and it hadn't been particularly difficult to avoid dispelling that notion. It was easy to ignore one's nature when there was nothing to bring it out. And Hannibal cared enough that he wouldn't try to force something he didn't believe existed, so there would be nothing to bring it out. Just softness and beauty, the face expected of him. A response as genuine as any other to the life he had now. Had Hannibal known, he wasn't sure what he would have done.

It was easy to allow his claws to dull when he thought his husband would do the same for him. He hadn't realized how much trust he'd placed in him until then.

Hannibal was disappearing more now. Not at night, when he'd wrap around Will like nothing had changed, but he'd leave for entire days, like he had when they were first married.

Their relationship was a swaying tower, piled high with every secret and openly ignored thing they didn't acknowledge, because acknowledging them would topple the tower, destroying them both. If Will ignored the absences, would it keep the tower upright, or just add another block to fall on them later? How many could he allow to pile up before it crushed him without the tower ever collapsing? Each felt like a sacrifice, like turning his bare back to a blade, knowing it could pierce him at any moment.

He'd formed a routine for his days, and remained moored in it even without Hannibal, for three days after Hannibal started disappearing. Three days of sitting in the garden or the library and being gentle and beautiful and unassuming. And when nothing changed, and his husband refused to offer an explanation on his own terms, Will started donning armor. He shored up the ruins of the forts in his mind, long neglected, and gathered himself.

This could be nothing. He could just want some space, it had to have been a change to go from being completely alone to living with a husband and a dog, even if he'd had months now to adjust. Maybe his kind had some sort of tradition, like humans did for the upcoming winter solstice, and he was preparing for it. Maybe the stories held grains of truth, and Will had ignored it, so grateful for a husband who would not touch and take and own.

On the fourth day, he began it the same as all the others before it. He fell asleep wrapped in the arms of his husband, and woke to Hannibal's voice calling him for breakfast, blindfold tied tightly. They talked of little nothings, and then Hannibal was gone. Will went to the library, and remained there for until the sun had risen fully overhead, the arcs of sunlight across the floor shortening, intensifying, before fading.

The hallways were as silent as always, absent of any sign of life. Winston was in the garden, like normal, so he could play in the short amount of sunlight they would have, deep in the winter as they were. Will had a purpose in his creeping, an intruder in his own home. The locked door, noticed his first day and ignored for months. It was in the interior of the house, so it wasn't the way out that he'd never discovered, but it was the only room he was barred from. If Hannibal had not left, if, for some reason, he chose to allow Will to believe he was leaving when he actually stayed in the house, he would be behind that door. The only other option to discover where Hannibal went would be to attempt scaling the high wall, or burrow a hole through the stone mountainside until he reached the other end.

Pressing an ear against the door, Will felt very much like he had as a child, listening through a door, pressed to the side by Beverly, as the adults talked about the future of the village and what his presence would mean. They had feared a war over him, or some violent noble razing the place to reach him. They did not know about the monster he was destined to marry, because his father would never tell a soul beside him, but they knew, in their bluntness and understandings as narrow as the valley that cupped their village, that beauty beget monstrosity. At this door, in his own home, he was that child again, listening in a twisted need to know, already old enough to understand that nothing he heard would be good.

Nothing good came from looking harder than he should. He knew that. He'd known it as a child and he knew it now. He'd avoided looking for so long, for months, because… because

he was safe, and loved. Because he could, given just a little more time, fall for Hannibal. Because maybe he'd already fallen for Hannibal, for his grand, impassioned speeches about artists Will had never heard of or the proper techniques for creating some dish or dessert, for his gentle touches and the way he clung to Will like just his presence was a benediction. For the fact that he'd gotten him a dog, just because he'd gotten bored. Because he cared, and Will had never felt a care like this before.

But he was there, pressed against a door, and even if he heard nothing, even if he walked away at that instant, he'd already chosen to listen. To doubt. A crack in their swaying, endlessly tall tower. A betrayal, the breaking of a promise never spoken, and they were going to crash to the ground. Maybe not now, maybe not even soon, but eventually. The crack was there, the faith faltering. The tower would fall.

The sound was distant enough to be almost imagined. If he hadn't been there, ear cupped to the door and straining for any hint of sound, he would never have heard it. Even then, it was the luck of someone, bad or good, him or Hannibal, that the person on the other side of that door had particularly strong lungs.

They were screaming.

The door couldn't have blocked that much, so they must have been far away, somewhere past the door. The voice sounded hoarse, breaking around the sound. A pause- for breath? Had they fallen unconscious, or given up? And then it started again, more angry, less pleading. Wordless exclamations of emotion.

The cracks spiderwebbed across the tower's walls, fractalling as they spread.

If he were a better man, or even one less accustomed to the bitter rage of those prideful men scorned, he may have torn that door open, thoughtless to any danger, and attempted to rescue whoever was down there. He was not that man, and he knew his home, because even now, in the face of this, it was still his home, far more than that little but he'd shared with his father for his whole childhood, and he knew there was no way out. A threat that had quickly turned to a curiosity, and then a fact of life. Even if he could break the lock, even if it was unlocked, and if it was then Hannibal had unlocked it, and if he'd unlocked it then he'd anticipated this, and then Will was far deeper than he'd intended. But even if he could break the lock, and find the person down there, they couldn't escape. And Hannibal would notice their absence from whatever room was down there. His cards, carefully hidden and now added to, would be shown, and he'd be forced to bare the claws he'd been so grateful to dull.

He needed someone to tell him what to do. He wasn't himself here, shed of his weapons and even now bearing only the shoddiest of armor. Alana would know what to do, could find some compassionate resolution to this. Beverly would laugh, and solve it, because she was the best at everything, a fact she'd told him, and he'd believed, since they were small children, splashing in a stream and comparing the minnows they caught.

Left alone, he wouldn't make the right decision. Left alone, he didn't know what to do.

He was a coward, or a fool. He stumbled away from the door, mind whirling, and returned to the library, a ghost. The pages of his book might as well have been blank for all that he saw,

head filled with that distant screaming. He wanted to run back and try the handle of that door, just to see if it was unlocked. He wanted to see the person in that room, to see if they were someone he knew, or a stranger. He didn't know which would be worse, to discover, to ignore. He wanted Hannibal to return, and wrap him in his arms, and read him a fairytale until he fell asleep. He wanted their tower to remain whole.

At some point, the spiraling turned to planning, half formed ideas branching out in every direction. How to save the person, how to save himself, how to escape or stay or help or hurt.

The sun set, a brilliant orange thing. Hannibal returned. There was fear with the blindfold again, a racing terror that he'd know, somehow, and Will wouldn't even be able to see his retribution coming. He hid it, tucking the feeling into stress about Winston and a small injury he'd suffered to his paw. They talked about nothing, like they always did. Endless nothing, plaster over growing cracks.

Hannibal didn't say anything, appearing completely oblivious. On a whim, a mix of desperation not to be noticed and everything he felt for Hannibal, he pressed a kiss to Hannibal's arm when he wrapped around Will in their bed.

It was small, a chaste peck, but Hannibal tightened his grip, burying his face in Will's curls and sighing contentedly.

He was destined to be married to a monster, to live beside one. He'd just hoped, stupidly, naively, that Hannibal's monstrosity ended at his shifting skin. He'd allowed himself to hope, built their tower out of that hope.

He hummed slightly, pressing his face into Hannibal's chest, soaking up his warmth. Preserving the moment. Entwined, they fell asleep.

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